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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HILLAH 000154

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SUBJECT: UN DEVELOPS ROLE IN SHIA HEARTLAND

CLASSIFIED BY: Davison, Mark, Leader, PRT Najaf, POL, Dept. of State.
REASON: 1.4 (a)

¶1. (C) Begin Summary: Supported by both the Coalition, PRT Najaf and the REO, SRSG PolAd Wilfred Buchta and an advance team traveled to Najaf City on 5 December to lay the groundwork for a visit in early 2007 of the SRSG to meet with Grand Ayatollah Sistani and Shia radical cleric Muktada Al Sadr. Confined to Special Forces Camp David, Buchta was unable to meet with representatives of either, but was able to discuss the logistics of such a visit with military on the ground, as well as meeting at Camp David with the Governor of Najaf and the Head of the Provincial Council. The Governor spoke of his desire to maintain Najaf as a secure environment and for this he needed Baghdad to apply principles of federalism and decentralization. End Summary

PLANS OF THE SRSG TO VISIT NAJAF

¶2. (C) Spurred by the desire of the Special Representative of the Secretary General of the UN (SRSG) to visit the Province of Najaf and to meet with Grand Ayatollah Sistani and radical Shia cleric Muktada Al Sadr at the end of January 2007, the SRSG's Political Advisor, Wilfred Buchta, carried out an advance visit to Najaf City on 5 December 2006. While there, he met with the Governor of Najaf and the Head of the Provincial Council, but did not meet with any representatives of either Sistani or Al Sadr. Buchta was accompanied by one of the SRSG's Military Advisors, LtCol Michael Donoghue of the Army of New Zealand, and three UN security officers. (Note: earlier reporting on this subject provided to PolSec by way of PRT Najaf Weekly NCT Sitreps.)

THE UN CAN PROVIDE AN ESSENTIAL LINK TO THE GOVERNOR AS
FEDERALIST

¶3. (C) In an evening debrief, Buchta told PRT Najaf Leader Davison the following:

It is the desire of the SRSG to capitalize on Buchta's developed contacts with the Shia in Najaf so as to provide a key link between Sistani and Al Sadr on the one hand (who refuse to meet directly with the Americans) and the US Embassy; Buchta is very appreciative of the support given by PRT Najaf and the REO to his advance visit -- notwithstanding that he did not meet with representatives of Sistani or Al Sadr, he was able to lay the groundwork for the movement of the SRSG, both to Camp David and to the eventual locales for those meetings in the future;

He had a very productive and informative meeting with the Governor, who characterized the Province of Najaf and the South Central region as secure and peaceful, putting into perspective the about once per week "notable security incidents" in Najaf Province;

The Governor is a keen advocate of both federalism and decentralization -- with the deteriorating security situation in Baghdad, provincial capitals, particularly in South Central, must be given the resources to provide for their own security, to defend themselves against the terrorists, as well as for their own prosperity;

A highly centralized state, according to the Governor, is as undesirable now as under Saddam Hussein -- even worse, the central authority now has its hands full with the security situation in Baghdad -- better that the provinces, both in the north and south, are able to look after themselves;

The Governor attributes provincial security incidents to the former Baathist and Al Qaeda undergrounds;

Notwithstanding his general view that Najaf was secure, the Governor said that he would not be standing in the next provincial election for the Provincial Council and thus would not continue as Governor -- he characterized his remaining in office as "too dangerous."

(Note: these reported comments by the Governor on federalism track with our record of his meetings with the Coalition in Baghdad, preparatory to the move to Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC), scheduled for mid-December.)

MOVEMENT, COMPLICATED BY SECURITY CONSIDERATIONS, AND POSSIBLE
SRSG SCENARIO

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14. (C) As Baghdad is aware, travel from REO Al Hillah to Najaf overland is at present problematic and movement is made on a case-by-case basis. Buchta arrived yesterday at the REO (the closest site to Najaf with overnight facilities) and we have supported his stay and that of his team. However, Buchta's movement today was facilitated by Coalition air lift capability.

Buchta and his colleagues were transported by helicopter from REO Al Hillah to Special Operations Camp David; the Governor and the Head of the Provincial Council met him at Camp David and there was no movement by Buchta or his team outside the Camp.

15. (C) Buchta spoke of the possible scenario for the SRSG to meet with Sistani and Al Sadr in the near term. The SRSG would be taken by helicopter to Camp David and then transported to former FOB Hotel for either meetings with the Governor and/or staging for travel to the homes of Sistani and Al Sadr. During consultations at Camp David today, the Coalition offered military transport; in his de-brief, Buchta told PRT Leader Davison that he the SRSG would not like such transport, preferring a UN armored vehicle, as he felt to be in a HumVee made him look "imbedded" with the military. LtCol Donohugh is working closely with Coalition elements, both at Camp David and in Kalzu to make the SRSG's January trip a logistic reality.

16. (C) Comment: Buchta is both dynamic and well-informed; his good contacts within the Shia religious and political community will facilitate any desires the SRSG holds to make an impact for the UNAMI in Najaf Province and with the Shia themselves; it remains to be seen if the SRSG can or will be able to follow through on this initiative by his Political Advisor.

17. (C) PRT Najaf leaves further distribution of this cable to the discretion of the Political Counselor.
VIERGUTZ